

Perpetuating the Flames of the Living Word — Inheriting One Hundred Years of Bible Teaching Ministry

© Otto Lui
Associate General Secretary (Training)



In the congress marking the 100th anniversary of Christian missions in 1907, a resolution was passed to launch the Sunday school ministry in the Chinese church. Missionaries at that time saw that Bible teaching was indispensable to laying a good foundation in church development. In 1910, they established a board of directors in Shanghai, founded the “China Sunday School Union” and published the first set of Sunday school materials. In 1950, a branch was set up in Hong Kong. In 1952, the organization was renamed as “China Sunday School Association”, which was the predecessor of “Christian Communications Limited” (abbreviated as “CCL” thereafter). Over the years, “CCL” has participated in various ways in the Sunday school ministry and, by means of publication and training, helped churches anchor themselves in God’s words.

Around 2000, “CCL” aspired to continuing to work towards the vision of the aforesaid congress and hoped in the year 2011 which marked the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Sunday school campaign, CCL witnessed that in over half of the counties and cities in China, there was at least one church engaging in systematic Bible teaching ministry, which refers to Bible teaching targeted at different age groups with various courses taught by properly trained Bible teachers. In the following ten years, we saw for ourselves how Bible teaching had flourished in the Chinese church. Although no official statistics were available, our observation was that Bible courses at various levels were taught across the country. The church in Wenzhou, which had devoted enormous efforts to developing the Bible teaching ministry as early as the 80s, has even dispatched teams to different parts of the country to train up teachers.

The Flourishing Bible Teaching Ministry

The Bible teaching ministry has flourished, which can be attributed to the following five reasons:



First is the free flow of information. In 2000, China officially joined the “World Trade Organization”, and the most significant impact is the opening-up of information. China allows the import of pop culture products from overseas like films, music, publications and games. As products from the Christian culture and other Western pop culture gain increasing popularity, children’s Bible story books and other Christian literature are readily available for sale in the mainland as well. Overseas Bible teaching course materials in different forms can also be found in the mainland and are accessible to even the smaller cities and counties.

Second is the experience gained by the forerunners who have nurtured a rich pool of teacher resources. Churches in Wenzhou are pioneers in the Sunday school ministry, and a Sunday school building is often provided in the church complex. Believers who have grown up from Sunday school in the 80s have now become young Bible teachers. With the relevant experience and systematic training in Christian Education theory, they are well-equipped to conduct training for Bible teachers in various cities in the country. The Bible teaching ministry can thus develop faster as there is no need to rely on overseas resources.

Third is that the church now seeks after higher goals since their basic needs have been satisfied. The basic needs refer to ministries like evangelizing, nurturing the new converts and sermon delivery which can now be undertaken by mainland church workers. What is needed by believers hereafter is to go deeper in their understanding and detailed exposition of Biblical truths. Therefore, the assistance required from overseas is now more on Bible study materials.

Fourth is the booming of the church bringing in more young people. Young people’s gatherings at the church tend to be more like Sunday worships whereby sermons are preached. However, the one-child generation of our age are confronted with problems which may not be addressed by the traditional church model. They need to be listened to and to have the time to reflect on how Biblical truths can help them tide over their difficulties. Through systematic Bible teaching and in-depth understanding of the Bible, they can better understand how to practise the Word in their everyday life.

The last and the most important factor is the work of the Holy Spirit. What mainland pastors told us is that their passion for Bible teaching comes from the Holy Spirit. This can be likened to the situation in the 1930s in which different churches in the mainland received the same vision from God to go to the northwestern regions to plant churches, which was not a man-

made plan, or an action jointly promoted by some organizations. When churches in different regions seek teaching materials from us, they might not have been influenced by other groups or co-workers. The only reasonable explanation therefore is that God works in the hearts of pastors in unconnected churches in different regions. They have all received the same vision about Bible teaching from God.

Training of Teachers and Publication of Teaching Materials

“CCL” focuses on supporting teacher training, publishing teaching materials catering to the specific needs of the church at the time and promoting the relevant teaching.

Back then, the church had the following common characteristics:

1. Cults were rampant as a lot of sheep were pastored by only very few shepherds, and those who had received training to clearly explain the Bible were small in number;
2. While those capable of delivering sermons could meet the demand, the quality of their sermons varied substantially. Apart from those who were trained and gifted to preach, many church workers could not preach well and sometimes just read from sermons' books. Some even merely shared their personal feelings without referring much to the Bible;
3. Bible study groups were virtually nonexistent in most churches. In gatherings other than Sunday worship, sermon delivery was still the main format, and believers lacked reflections on how to apply Biblical truths to their daily life;
4. While some churches might have overseas Bible study materials, it was hard to apply some of the teachings due to the differences between the Chinese culture and overseas culture.

Therefore, the “Living Word” curriculum is marked by the following features:

1. The materials are published in 28 volumes covering the 66 books of the Bible, each carrying both a teacher's and a student's version;
2. Much importance is attached to correct exposition of Biblical verses, a student-oriented teaching approach and applying Biblical truths to one's daily life. An emphasis is placed on “taking action”.



The materials are published with the name of “The Living Word Curriculum Series”, carrying two meanings:

Learning the Living Word in a lively way: the materials adopt a student-oriented approach. Catering to students' different background and age as well as their learning style, the Bible is studied in a lively and flexible manner. Interactions among students in a small group are

much emphasized. Small groups are common today, but the mainland church had the faintest notion of what a small group was some 20 years ago. Even if there were small groups, one-way teaching by the teacher was the mainstay. In “Living Word”, however, different activities are introduced to lead into the relevant Bible verses. Group participants are encouraged to share their internal struggles and thoughts and they will be listened to by a sympathetic ear. A spiritual fellowship where brothers and sisters can open their heart is built.

Practising the Living Word: much attention is put on practising the Word. Learning the Bible is not just about knowledge acquisition. This is only the first step. What should follow is that Biblical truths should be “internalized” and become part of one’s values guiding one’s behavior. Only by that will believers be able to become God’s powerful witnesses. Therefore, “taking action” is emphasized in every lesson, and such actions are taken after group discussions and one’s self-reflections. They are personal decisions which are not the result of other people’s influence.



Over the years, after the hard work and faithful service put in by many co-workers from different backgrounds who help with compiling, editing, publishing, distributing and teaching the courses, there are on average 10,000 brothers and sisters who join the “Living Word” study every year. We have borne testimony to how groups after groups of pastors and believer leaders becoming totally committed to Bible teaching and making meticulous preparations week after week for their Bible study classes. As a result, many churches have been totally transformed.

Challenges and Needs in the Future

Going forward, we face one major challenge and have to work specifically on two areas, and we need your prayer and continuous support.

One major challenge: the mainland church has entered a new phase of development. While Christianity has become part of the society and culture, it faces the challenge of “sinicization”. We must persist with our efforts to go deeper in our Bible teaching to enable believers to practise Biblical teachings, let the Biblical truths change their values and mold them to bear powerful testimony for God.

The first area of work is to finish the compilation of the remaining two volumes. From the first Book of Genesis to now, a total of 26 volumes have been published. The remaining two are on the books of Ezekiel and Isaiah. We will join hands with mainland co-workers in working on them, aiming to draw our work to a perfect ending. In the course of publishing teaching materials, we have also helped groom publication talents in the mainland.

The second area of work is to build the “LW ePlatform”. Since the teaching materials have been published and online learning is now part of our daily life, our next stage of work is to re-arrange the “Living Word” materials to suit online teaching, which can be used by individuals and in small group study. Some 20 years ago when the “Living Word” program first began, we also conducted a trial run of the “Living Word” website where the courses could be downloaded.

Conclusion

From the above, readers will be able to see that our entire Bible teaching ministry is not a result of people’s plans, but rather a ministry directly led by God Himself. We are thankful that through the years of participation in this ministry, we have witnessed the wonderful things done by the almighty God. We have inherited one hundred years of Bible teaching and will certainly continue to follow God’s steer and do our utmost! We firmly believe that although seemingly irremovable mountains may be in our way ahead, the God who is in the past, the present and the future will guide us in sailing through all the difficulties!



Holding Hands on the Path of Truth Pursuit and Practice ——

Sharing of mainland “Living Word” students

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It has been 15 years since the preparation and publishing of “The Living Word Curriculum Series” (abbreviated as “Living Word” thereafter) started. To date, 26 volumes which cover the systematic study of 64 books in the Old and New Testaments have been published. More than 120,000 copies were in circulation in a large majority of provinces and cities in the mainland. This is entirely God’s grace!¹ We thank God that mainland church leaders and believers are being strengthened in biblical teaching through the “Living Word” materials. The candid sharing of mainland church leaders and believers bear witness to the fact that close partnership of the editorial team, frontline workers and Chinese Christians has brought about significant advancement on our path of truth pursuit and practice.



A call to return to God’s Words

“As a believer, it is a huge challenge if one wants to study all the books of the Bible at least once. But using the ‘Living Word’ materials as a guide now, we can study the biblical books one by one. To be honest, we all have a sense of achievement. If we keep going with unfaltering determination, we would be able to finish the entire Bible. This would truly be a significant breakthrough!”

—Wife of Pastor Xu of the eastern region

“‘Living Word’ reminds us to constantly go back to God’s words which help us become more capable of living out His call. ‘Living Word’ is also resourceful for shepherding. It introduces a ‘three-pronged’ (three-ring clasped) Bible teaching concept which renews our minds and replaces the one-way, passive shepherding and learning mode.”

—Sister Lu of the northwestern region

The Bible passages are speaking to me

“I realized that the Bible should not only be read as a whole, but the details chosen to be recorded also require our attention. The ‘Living Word’ is an array of colours which shed light on what the biblical passages say in various aspects of my daily life. During the process, I discovered that the Bible is indeed talking to me every day empowering me to try to live out a renewed life.”

—Sister Shen of the central-northern region

“While going through the ‘Living Word’, I saw how God called Jeremiah. Jeremiah would be unable to take up the responsibility if he relied on his own strength. But he could do it if he relied on God. This reminds me that we cannot do anything on our own, yet if we follow the example of Jeremiah, we can carry out His will, live out what we learn and faithfully pronounce God’s words in our daily life.”

—A study group leader in the northeastern region

Churches experience changes

“Through studying the ‘Living Word’, the church began forming small groups. We started with six groups, each with five to six members. The ‘Living Word’ has aroused the enthusiasm of turning back to the Bible and learning what God says in our church.”

—Wife of Pastor Cai in the eastern region

“Before initiating the ‘Living Word’, the church did not have any systematic Bible study. All the Bible study meetings basically were sermons delivered by the ministers. After introducing the ‘Living Word’, we opened the door to a process in which lay believers learn how to study the Bible. During the process, the church experiences continuing growth of the small group and growth of small group leaders, the entire shepherding framework of the church from top to bottom also emerged and became established.”

—Sister Cao in the central-northern region

¹ In the morning of 9 October 2021, a webinar entitled “Perpetuating the Flames of the Living Word—CCL Bible Teaching Ministry Thanksgiving and Vision Sharing Seminar” was held in the midst of a tropical typhoon hovering over Hong Kong. Over 70 pastors, ministers, supporters and CCL colleagues joined the webinar witnessing the prolific results arisen from the introduction of “The Living Word Curriculum Series” to mainland churches over the past 15 years. We offered our praise and gratitude to God for being able to serve mainland churches by means of the “Living Word” materials. Our vision and outlook for the future was also shared.

Please support the Living Word Bible Teaching Ministry

Mainland churches face many challenges while defending the truth, they constantly desire deeper understanding of the truth. We wish to expediate the editing and publication of the remaining volumes of the “Living Word” series. The electronic version of the entire “Living Word” curriculum series, 28 volumes in total, has also been planned. This can promote widespread use of the “LW ePlatform” for individual and small group study.

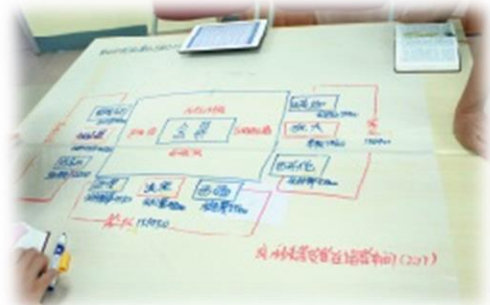
Please remember this ministry in your prayers and give support to our need to raise USD 384,615 as operation expenditure. Thank you!



Prayers

1. Inspiring Biblical teaching

With better education, mainland Christians today can better understand the literal meanings of the scripture than believers of the past decade. Yet when their pastors ask them inspiring or guiding questions; they cannot think out of the box and tend to look for model answers.



May the Lord give wisdom to and prepare suitable materials for pastors so they can guide believers to have multi-dimensional thinking and explore the applications of the scripture in different scenarios.

2. Staying steadfast in ministry



The pandemic in the past 2 years, the floods that struck Henan and eastern China months ago, and the restrictions on electricity supply have posed difficulties to many theological seminary graduates - wavering faith among believers due to the difficult circumstances, falling donations from believers with reduced income. Some new preachers are facing huge pressure, while others, due to insufficient church donations, need to take on other work besides ministering.

May the Lord keep the new preachers, renew their strength so they will not give up despite their limited experience in church management and pastoral ministry, the external pressure, shortage of manpower and resources etc.

3. Listening to young believers

The style of church gatherings of young believers in the mainland is similar to that of worship services, comprising mainly of one-way preaching by pastors, lacking interaction. But faced with clashes with materialism, values and religious faith, young believers are expecting more personal ministry, dialogue and inspiring interaction. A pastor shares: *“Young believers are not satisfied with*



one-way preaching; they want pastors to listen and respond to their feelings.”

May the Lord give pastors wisdom, help them understand the needs of young believers, help them tackle life issues through applying Biblical truths. May He lead young believers to not just wait to be ministered to, but be willing to seek personal growth, grasping each chance to live out their faith.

4. Livelihood under restricted electricity supply



The large-scale restriction on electricity supply in recent months may bring much pressure to people’s livelihood, e.g. reduced productivity, rising prices, rising unemployment rate etc. A pastor shares: *“Please pray for the emotional stress people suffer because of the changing economic situation, and that we can guide them through Biblical teachings to rely on God in whatever circumstances.”*

May the Lord look after people’s needs, have mercy on those whose income is affected by reduced work at factories; may He strengthen pastors ministering to marketplace believers to help them to cope emotionally and economically, and rely on and turn to God for guidance.

~ THE END ~

Pray for China

Published since 1974

~ Pray for China publications can be served as a platform to express the latest situations and needs of churches and leaders in the mainland.

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